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SOME RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN READING INTEREST AND READING COMPREHENSION.

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The relationships between reading interest and reading comprehension were studied through the performances of 578 sixth-grade students divided into seven ability groups. Each group was required to read material with readability scores two grades higher than the group's mean reading ability. They rated the selections according to degrees of interest and answered questions designed to measure comprehension. It was concluded that high interest produced greater comprehension which often enabled a child to read beyond his measured reading ability. High ability students were less affected by reading interest than low ability students. Low content interest allowed more accurate discrimination between good and poor readers than high content interest. A reassessment of current methods of evaluating reading ability might be necessary in order to determine if subject responses reflect low ability or low interest. Implications for educational practice in the areas of testing and teaching are discussed. Possible curriculum changes are suggested. References are listed. (BS)

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SOME RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN

READING INTEREST AND READING COMPREHENSION

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The effectiveness of any reading program is ultimately determined by the kind of reader it produces. Sensitive researchers must raise such questions as: Once a child has acquired the ability to read, what place does reading assume in his life? Does it become a positive factor in his personal growth? Does he use books to his own advantage? For what purpose? For what effects? The importance of guiding the growth of reading interests of children is emphasized by the general poverty of reading interests characteristic of many adults (6).

Interest manifests itself in many ways. Teachers and parents report instances in which children who have poor reading skills are able to construct complicated models by "reading the directions" included in the kit. Teenagers are reported to be able to read a state driver's manual, read and pass a test on that manual, and yet are unable to read their assigned textbooks.

The writer vividly recalls an instance in which a fifth grade child, unable to score at a second grade level on any of the silent or oral reading tests administered to him, demonstrated a remarkable facility with words as he read with ease and relative fluency from a children's encyclopedia a portion of an article on dinosaurs. Further, he correctly pronounced "tyrrosaurus rex" and explained that he was one of the few flesh eaters of his era--"by contrast with the vegetarian habits of his cousins"!

Such instances are not unique. They do suggest that the somewhat unique and highly personal feelings that a child has when he is confronted with reading material may be a key to what he will or will not understand, to what he will or will not read.

Historically, the importance of interest as a factor in reading instruction has long been emphasized by researchers (1), (3), (4), (5), (11). Robinson (7) in a review of trends in the teaching of reading speaks of the importance of "feeding children's interests" in order to encourage them to use their reading skills.

Comprehension is one of the most important skills, or abilities, in reading. Shores (8) discussing several inadequacies of reading tests implies that the interest of the reader in the reading content of tests may be an important factor influencing his performance on a test of reading comprehension. Witty (12) in a more recent article suggests that interest is a factor in increasing reading "efficiency" and cites the need for such research.

While children's reading interests have received considerable attention in the literature on reading, specific applications of this knowledge to comprehension in reading are surprisingly scant. Strang (9) points out that even readability formulae do not include the factor of interest. Indeed, in a somewhat comprehensive search of the literature, only one other study (2) was

found which attempted an investigation of such a nature, and which falls within the scope of this paper.

The problem

The writer believes that the level of comprehension a child derives from his reading is often underestimated. Furthermore, it is possible that tests of reading which do not take into account the interests of the reader yield results which are incomplete. The central concern of this investigation is a study of some relationships between reading interests and reading comprehension. This concern is expressed in the following questions:

1. What is the relationship between levels of interest and the comprehension of materials read by children?

2. What is the relationship between a high level of interest and comprehension when subjects are confronted with materials two grade levels above their measured reading ability?

3. What is the relationship between a low level of interest and comprehension when subjects are confronted with materials two grade levels above their measured reading ability?

4. What is the relationship between reading interest and reading comprehension if this same relationship exists among readers of different ability levels?

Procedures

The study included 578 subjects, drawn from 17 sixth grade classes in schools located in a large metropolitan area on the West Coast. Of this number, complete data were available on 252 boys and 232 girls. Subjects were delimited to socio-economic levels within the range of upper-lower to lower-middle class members of a multi-ethnic urban society as determined by the Warner Social Scale Index (10). Intelligence quotients, measured by the Kuhlmann-Anderson Intelligence Tests, ranged from 77 to 140 with a mean of 105. Chronological ages ranged from 11 years 3 months to 13 years 7 months. The mean reading ability was 6.7, the average for the grade placement at the

time of year in which the investigation was conducted.

The subjects were divided into seven groups determined by the average scores on the reading vocabulary and reading comprehension sub-tests achieved on the Gates Reading Survey Test, Form I. Time was not to be a factor in the subsequent reading assignments and therefore the speed of comprehension sub-test was not included. Each group was required to read fifteen stories with readability scores, according to the Dale-Chall formula, of two grades higher than the mean reading ability for each group. Thus, subjects scoring at fourth grade level on the reading test, read stories with a readability index of sixth grade. This procedure was followed for all reading levels represented in the subject population, ranging from two years below grade level to four years above grade level.

The subjects rated the stories on a four-point scale to determine degrees of interest, and then answered questions of fact, sequence, and questions requiring the reader to make inferences, draw conclusions and recognize the author's point of view. Comprehension scores from stories of high interest were compared to scores of low interest stories.

Findings

The first analysis of responses was concerned with factors influencing comprehension scores. An analysis of variance of comprehension scores as a function of level of interest and reading level for all subjects revealed that there was a highly significant difference (P=.001) between the reading comprehension behavior of each of the seven reading groups irrespective of the influence of interest.

The data grouped for sex differences revealed that the boys' comprehension was slightly lower than the girls' insofar as the total number of subjects is concerned. However, in three of the seven groups this finding was reversed.

It is an interesting result upon which speculation is possible, and is a fruitful area for future research.

The second set of data from the analysis of variance also revealed highly significant findings (P=.001) insofar as the differences between the comprehension of high interest and low interest stories, and irrespective of ability group. The fact that this difference is significant at the .001 level for all subjects does not, however, indicate results that are predictable for the different ability groups, although it is reasonable to conclude that the reading groups are significantly different from each other in levels of performance of reading comprehension, and that they are similar, as a group, in that they respond with significantly higher comprehension on stories of high interest than they do on low interest.

The third evaluation of the data reveals that insofar as the interaction of reading interest and reading comprehension is concerned, within each of the reading groups, the comprehension scores do indeed vary as a function of both the ability of the reading group and of level of interest in stories read. The data indicate, however, that there is a gradual diminishing difference of the effect of interest as reading ability increases. Indeed, it seems that interest as a factor of reading comprehension is significantly more important for the lower ability groups; and this phenomenon of gradually diminishing effect is significant at greater than the .001 level!

In view of the striking similarity of all groups at the high interest level and the difference extant between groups at the low interest level, a reassessment of the significance of difference between groups is necessary before obvious conclusions are tenable. Therefore, a Sheffé Test for Post-Hoc Comparisons was run. The results revealed that the low interest level functions to differentiate between reading ability groups, whereas, except for the

lowest ability group, high interest does not differentiate between reading groups (P=.05). In the light of such data, then, the negatively cumulative effect of little or no interest on comprehension, particularly for lower ability groups, becomes increasingly important.

Conclusions

Within the delimitations of the study and with respect to the subjects of this investigation the following conclusions are tenable:

1. A high interest in stories read by children results in greater comprehension than that which results from low interest.
2. Comprehension of material read by students can be expected to vary as a function of both reading interest and reading ability.
3. Reading interest, as a factor of reading comprehension, may enable most students to read beyond their measured reading ability.
4. High ability students are less affected by reading interest than low ability students.
5. Reading interest, as a factor of reading comprehension, is significant (at the .001 level) to children with reading ability from two years below grade level to one year above grade level. Beyond that level, high ability is sufficient to maintain comprehension.
6. A low interest in the content of reading material is better able to discriminate between the reading ability of children than high reading interest.
7. At a high reading interest level, except for children two or more years below grade level, very little discrimination between reading ability levels is possible.

8. For readers at or below grade level, there is reason to believe that low interest has a negatively cumulative effect.
9. A reassessment of current methods of evaluating children labeled as "poor readers" may be necessary in order to determine if the reader's response is the result of low ability or low interest.
10. There is some evidence to indicate that commonly held expectations of performance of both girls and boys need to be reevaluated, particularly with respect to the influence of reader interest.

Implications for Educational Practice

The foregoing conclusions have held the writer in check. He has not attempted to generalize beyond the confines of his data or the delimitations of his study. Nor is that the purpose of this section. Rather, this is the writer's attempt at taking the "step beyond" if the findings of this investigation become "truth" as demonstrated by future research and replication.

Implications for educational practice would seem to be legion. For test makers and publishers there is certainly the suggestion that attention be given to the factor of interest. One generalization that may be ventured is that present tests, without consideration for reader interest, deny many children the opportunity to demonstrate their actual ability. It might be further generalized that present tests of reading are able to discriminate between readers because of the low interest factor. It would seem merited to question this practice. It would also seem justifiable to question the role of education relative to testing and teaching.

The educative role would seem to imply that both measurement and evaluation enable educators to take a positive rather than a negative approach to

students. The need for tests to weigh reader interest along with reader performance would seem to be a reasonable recommendation.

Another "look" at children labeled "poor reader" or retarded reader would also appear to be an outgrowth of this investigation. The means of arriving at such a diagnosis would certainly need reevaluating if the proposed changes in tests were to take place. Diagnosticians, trained to look more positively at children would be another projection of current practice.

The reality of the need for readability formulae may also be challenged. If children are capable of reading beyond their estimated (measured?) ability if interest is high, then perhaps the real need is to find better ways of measuring interest rather than readability, especially if low interest increases the difficulty of comprehension. For researchers in readability, the need to accommodate for reader interest is clear.

Perhaps the most important applications are those which have to do with classroom practice. Certainly the charge to the teacher and researchers alike is to discover better ways of determining children's reading interest in content. The implication to provide children with the opportunity to explore their interests is very strong. Some of the successes attributed to individualized reading programs may be more the result of such opportunities rather than the methodology itself.

If, indeed, children, spurred on by their own interests, are capable of greater comprehension at levels of reading in excess of that which they are presumed able to read, it would seem to be possible, perhaps imperative, for the teacher to use such information as a wedge to increase a child's self-confidence and thus insure continued learning. Assuredly, it is added evidence for the need to break the lock step of "grade levels" inherent in school organization practices in general and as concerns the teaching of reading in particular.

The need for an abundance of reading material is clear. The confines of reading textbooks, graded, and used in series, would seem to be a clear violation of the interest needs of children. Additionally there is a challenge to the need for "high interest low vocabulary" adaptations and abridgements which many teachers seek.

This should not be inferred to mean that children should be provided opportunities to work or to read only in their unique areas of interest. Certainly the school has the responsibility to encourage children to expand their interests. It can hardly hope to do so successfully if the materials of instruction are narrowly confined to assumed grade level progression, nor can teachers encourage children to work in their areas of interest if they are themselves restricted to the lock step of the textbook.

The dreams of one man and one generation sometimes become the realities of another. So, too, is it with the aforementioned implications for education. The writer is fully aware that without many additional studies few, if any, are worthy of application.

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